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Understanding academics' resistance towards (online) student evaluation

Bart Rienties

Many higher educational institutions and academic staff are still sceptical about the validity and reliability of student evaluation questionnaires, in particular when these evaluations are completed online. One month after a university-wide implementation from paper to online evaluation across 629 modules, (perceived) resistance and ambivalence amongst academic staff were unpacked. A mixed-method study was conducted amongst 104 academics using survey methods and follow-up semi-structured interviews. Despite a successful “technical” transition (i.e., response rate of 60%, similar scores to previous evaluations), more than half of respondents reported a negative experience with this transition. The results indicate that the multidimensional nature of ambivalence towards change and the dual nature of student evaluations can influence the effectiveness of organisational transition processes.

Keywords: online student evaluation, academics perceptions, resistance, mixed-method study.

When students' opinions are misconstrued as calibrated ordinal variables, the consequences of divergent role expectations are mistakenly interpreted as a quantified measure of teaching incompetence, while the results of converging expectations are read as objective evidence of teaching excellence (Titus, 2008, p. 414).

Introduction

Given that student evaluations play a key role in retention, promotion and tenure decisions (Baldwin & Blattner, 2003; Kember & Ginns, 2012), many academic staff are concerned that a move to an online survey method may lead to lower response rates and consequently a less representative reflection of the teaching and learning experience. Even though several institutions have successfully implemented online student

evaluations (Dommeyer, Baum, Hanna, & Chapman, 2004; Nulty, 2008), many higher educational institutions and academic staff remain sceptical about their value (Bennett & De Bellis, 2010; Crews & Curtis, 2011; Stowell, Addison, & Smith, 2011).

Irrespective of efficiency savings for institutions in terms of processing online student evaluations, several advantages for academics have been proposed in the literature when switching to online evaluation. First of all, the turn-around of student evaluations is faster, thereby providing academics more rapid feedback to fine-tune their educational design (Bennett & De Bellis, 2010; Crews & Curtis, 2011; Stowell et al., 2011). Second, as it is easier for most students to write their reflections of the learning experiences on a keyboard than by hand, several studies have found that students provide more lengthy comments (Bennett & De Bellis, 2010) and more thoughtful comments online (Stowell et al., 2011). Finally, online evaluations may be less vulnerable to instructor variables on the day of evaluation (Dommeyer et al., 2004; Stowell et al., 2011).

Most studies on online student evaluations have focussed on students' experiences (e.g., Dommeyer et al., 2004; Gamliel & Davidovitz, 2005; Stowell et al., 2011). However, Crews and Curtis (2011) conducted a quantitative study amongst 49 hospitality teachers one year after a switch from paper to online evaluations. They found that most of the teachers still preferred traditional paper evaluations, and indicated that they perceived this method resulted in higher response rates. Although this study provides important (quantitative) insights in a single-discipline context, in this study I conducted a mixed method, explorative case-study following a university-wide implementation of online student evaluation amongst 629 modules with 8360 students.

According to Daly and Finnigan (2010, p. 118) “[a] case-study approach is most appropriate when the phenomenon of interest has a level of complexity that requires multiple data sources and methods to gain an in-depth understanding”. In this case-study approach (Yin, 2009), one month after the university-wide transition to online student evaluations was completed a mixed method study was conducted amongst 104 module convenors in order to measure and unpack their experiences. Follow-up semi-structured interviews were conducted amongst eight academics from four faculties. Although I (naively) expected that academics would be very positive about the transition, given extensive consultation and communication (involving a range of stakeholders) and comparable response rates to previous years, the results indicated strong resistance amongst some groups. In this study, I will further unpack and attempt to understand this resistance, which may be helpful for other institutions considering a transition to online student evaluation.

Understanding academics’ anxiety towards (online) student evaluations

One major reason why some staff are sceptical about online student evaluations is a concern that these results will be used for tenure and promotion (Baldwin & Blattner, 2003; Stowell et al., 2011). According to Baldwin and Blattner (2003), historically student evaluation results were only used to improve teaching and learning. However, the increased availability of student evaluation results has provided management with greater opportunity to compare academics across-the-board regarding “teacher effectiveness” for tenure (Baldwin & Blattner, 2003).

The move towards a centralised (online) system might give academics additional support for the notion that student evaluations are primarily used for promotion/demotion (Baldwin & Blattner, 2003; Titus, 2008). As staff have limited control over the implementation of the evaluations online, some may be concerned

about the negative influences, in particular of students who did not attend classes (Stowell et al., 2011). Furthermore, while the use of student evaluations is common practice in many universities, there remain several critics about the appropriateness of these questionnaires (Baldwin & Blattner, 2003; Titus, 2008). For example, in research comparing the experiences of 62 students and thirteen staff members, Titus (2008) found that students primarily filled in the questionnaires based upon their emotional reaction to a “good experience” (friendliness and helpfulness of lecturer; enthusiasm of the lecturer, etc.), rather than whether they actually believed they had learned something valuable. “Many faculty see [student evaluation] forms as inviting “consumer complaints”, thereby generating cruel and irrelevant commentary” (Titus, 2008, p. 413).

A second main reason may be engrained in the human psyche, namely a resistance or ambivalence towards change. According to Piderit (2000, p. 783), “[s]uccessful organisational adaptation is increasingly reliant on generating employee support and enthusiasm for proposed changes, rather than merely overcoming resistance”. As argued by Hanson (2009, p. 557), many studies tend “to blame the individual academic and attribute delays or failure in implementation to an oversimplification of negative attributes, ill-will, indolence, ineptitude or indiscipline on the part of those at whom the change is aimed ... or to portray resistance to change as irrational”.

In her review of “resistance” or ambivalence literature, Piderit (2000) argues that understanding employees in general or academics ambivalence in particular towards a change needs to be understood against three dimensions of attitudes: cognitive, emotional and intentional. The *cognitive dimension* refers to the academic’s beliefs about (online) student evaluations, while the *emotional dimension* refers to the academic’s feelings in response to student evaluations. Finally, the *intentional*

dimension refers to an academic's plan or resolution to take some action. As indicated by Piderit (2000), academics might have a mix of positive and negative thoughts, emotions and behavioural intentions. For example, although an academic might appreciate the organisational/financial benefits of administering the student evaluations online and see merits in a faster return of results, perhaps the inability to control which students (e.g., those who did not attend lectures are now given an opportunity to provide feedback) complete a questionnaire might lead to negative emotions. As a result, these negative emotions may influence an academic's intentions to pro-actively stimulate her students to complete the online evaluations.

A third explanation may be related to academics' attitudes towards technology. While many studies have found that students are keen to adopt technology in the classroom (Crews & Curtis, 2011), some groups of academics are less enthusiastic (Hanson, 2009; Jimoyiannis & Komis, 2007; Rienties, Brouwer, & Lygo-Baker, 2013; Rienties, Giesbers, Lygo-Baker, Ma, & Rees, In Press). Others argue that the institutional culture may also be a limiting factor (Hanson, 2009; Kinchin, 2012; Rienties et al., 2013). There is also evidence that academics may equate online student evaluations to negative feelings towards public online evaluation resources (such as www.ratemyprofessor.com), whereby academics might be "at the mercy of their students" (Crews & Curtis, 2011). For many academics, the adoption of technology is linked with anxiety and negative attitudes that occur through uncertainty (Blin & Munro, 2008; Hanson, 2009; Hu, Clark, & Ma, 2003; Jimoyiannis & Komis, 2007). In order to explore how academics' attitudes and intentions towards online student evaluations were influenced by cognitive, emotional and technological dimensions, first a detailed case-study description will be provided of how the university implemented

the transition towards online evaluation. Afterwards, I will discuss whether (or not) this transition was successful as perceived by academics.

Case-study description

This study took place at a UK university that offers a range of programmes in Arts & Humanities, Business & Law, Engineering & Physics, and Health & Medical sciences. Up until 2008 several departments implemented (their own version of) a paper-based student evaluation. In the period 2009-2012, one standardised questionnaire was distributed in paper-format by a central educational unit. This form enabled students to indicate on a scale of 1 (low) to 5 (high) against a range of eight questions. In addition to the developmental purposes of the student evaluations, in recent years a target has been indicated of 4.0 on appraisal forms in relation to teaching and learning.

An extended version of the student evaluation consisting of 23 closed questions and two open questions was implemented campus-wide online across 629 modules in December 2012. This questionnaire was designed by the educational unit in conjunction with 20 academics, drawn from different disciplines. In line with recent research (Centra, 2005; Kember & Ginns, 2012; Onwuegbuzie et al., 2007; Titus, 2008), five categories were developed: teaching support; learning experience; assessment and feedback; student-teacher interaction; and module structure and organisation.

Communication with stakeholders about transition from paper to online evaluation

In line with recommendations by several researchers (Bennett & De Bellis, 2010; Crews & Curtis, 2011; Daly & Finnigan, 2010; Kember & Ginns, 2012), the educational unit undertook six activities aimed to consult, inform and communicate with academics, heads of departments and students about the transition to the online student evaluation system. First of all, a dedicated website with information about the move to the online

student evaluation was provided three months before the launch of the online student evaluation system. Second, three drop-in sessions were run whereby academics could ask questions about the implementation, which were attended by 30 academics. Third, three (personalised) emails were sent to the 380 module convenors before the actual launch of the online student evaluation system, followed by three weekly (personalised) emails with the respective response rate of the module(s) and suggestions to further encourage response rates. Fourth, several materials (e.g., YouTube movie, Powerpoint slides) were prepared for academics to inform their students about the move to the online student evaluation. Fifth, four mails were sent to heads of departments and senior management to inform them of the transition and to encourage their staff to actively inform their students about the transition.

Finally, as recommended by Dommeyer et al. (2004) students were given an introduction on how to access the online student evaluation system by their lecturer in week 9 (where modules last for 12 weeks). Afterwards, in line with Crews and Curtis (2011) and Nulty (2008), students received three email reminders in a period of three weeks. 17644 responses were recorded, leading to an average response rate per module of 60.10% (SD = 19.51). Although the response rate of the paper-based version was slightly higher (M = 62.48, SD = 26.45), no statistical difference was found when comparing this to the online student evaluation ($t = 1.041$, $p = ns$). Previous studies (Dommeyer et al., 2004; Nulty, 2008; Stowell et al., 2011) on transition from paper-based to online evaluation have indicated a response rate of 21-47% (average 33%), which implies an average drop in response rates of 20-23% after switching to online student evaluations. Therefore, obtaining an average response rate in a campus-wide implementation of 60% was above expectations.

Ten days after the closure of the student evaluation, each of the 380 module convenors received a detailed report about their respective evaluation scores and how these compared to the average within their respective faculty. In comparison to previous years, in addition to mean-scores and the raw data a visualisation of the scores in the form of diagrams as well as suggestions were provided from the educational literature on how to improve (where applicable) each of the five areas. Of the 1253 academic staff evaluated online, 76% scored a 4.0 or above, while in 2011 of the 873 academic staff 71% scored a 4.0 or above.

In other words, given that the response rates were comparable to the paper-based implementation the year before, the questionnaire provided a better psychometric quality in comparison to the previous version used (Rienties & Tempelaar, In Preparation), more staff passed the 4.0 target, and twice as much feedback was written by students, the expectation was that the majority of academic staff would be satisfied with the transition despite (potential) ambivalence or resistance to change.

Method

Participants

An online survey was designed and implemented one month after module convenors received their feedback report (see next section). All 380 module convenors received two email invitations to participate in the survey and follow-up interviews. In total 115 responses were collected, of which 104 had sufficient responses, leading to a (reasonable) response rate of 27%. 59% were male, 44% had taught for less than five years at the respective institution, while 31% had taught for more than 10 years. The composition of respondents based upon their functional role (in order of frequency)

was: 35% lecturer, 23% professor, 14% senior lecturer, 12% tutor, 6% senior tutor, and the remaining were other (6%) or did not share this information.

Instruments

Questionnaire of academics experience with online student evaluation

Based upon an extensive literature study on the key success factors of transition towards online surveying (Bennett & De Bellis, 2010; Crews & Curtis, 2011; Dommeyer et al., 2004; Kember & Ginns, 2012; Nulty, 2008; Stowell et al., 2011) and academics resistance/ambivalence in general (Blin & Munro, 2008; Hanson, 2009; Hu et al., 2003; Piderit, 2000; Titus, 2008), I designed a questionnaire around five key themes (items in brackets), namely: the communication to academic staff (4); the appropriateness of response rate(s) (5); the design of the student evaluation questionnaire (4); the feedback reports to academics (5); and the overall experience with the transition (2). In addition, two open text boxes were provided asking about items of the student evaluation questionnaire that were not appropriate or missing. Finally, two open text boxes were provided about the main (dis)advantages of the online student evaluation.

Semi-structured interviews

An invitation at the end of the questionnaire was provided to participate in a (follow-up) semi-structured interview. In the above reminder mail, this invitation was also sent to all 380 module convenors. Eight academics representing each of the four faculties joined the semi-structured interviews (Lichtman, 2013; Yin, 2009), which lasted on average for 45 minutes. The interviews were based on the same five themes as the survey, but academics were free to add new themes. Four females and four males attended the interviews, and a mix of functional profiles was present. The interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed and coded using emergent themes analysis to identify the key

themes expressed by the participants, in line with Lichtman (2013). The participants were assured that questionnaire and interview results would be completely anonymous.

Results

Results Questionnaire of academics experience with online student evaluation

The descriptive statistics on the 20 items are illustrated in Table 1. In Table 2, the descriptive statistics of the five categories are illustrated, as well as their cronbach alphas and correlations. As expected, the five categories were moderately to strongly correlated to each other. In terms of communication, taking a cut-off rate of 3.25 as a positive value, 52% of participants were positive about the communication received in terms of the transition to the online student evaluation. Similarly, 51% were positive about the response rate and getting students to participate. 36% were positive about the (new) questionnaire design. 50% were positive about the feedback provided to academics, while only 33% were positive about the overall experience.

➔ Insert Table 1 about here

➔ Insert Figure 1 about here

As indicated by the relatively large standard deviations in Table 1, participants had substantially different perceptions about the transition to the online student evaluation. Several academics had strongly negative experiences with the transition, as indicated in Figure 1. Taking a cut-off value of 2.5 denoting a negative experience, 25% of respondents were not satisfied with the online student evaluation. At the same time, Figure 1 indicates two peaks (one around the median value and one between 3.50-3.75) of academics being neutrally positive to positive about their average experience.

In Table 3, the themes identified based upon the 124 comments provided by respondents in the main (dis)advantages textboxes are illustrated. Respondents were most positive about the ease of distribution for module convenors and the feedback provided on student evaluation scores. In addition, as has been found previously (Stowell et al., 2011) several respondents indicated that more time was available in class for doing other things, and the faster turn-around of the student evaluation scores. Furthermore, in line with Dommeyer et al. (2004) some respondents like R64 (average score respondent provided in brackets) indicated that the opportunity of academics and students to fiddle with the questionnaires was now reduced.

➔ Insert Table 3 about here

“The main advantage to the online method is that they cannot be fiddled by staff. This means that all staff will respect the results rather than accuse people of fiddling and ignore the results” (R64, Business education female lecturer, 5-10 year experience, M = 4.00).

Furthermore, several staff (e.g. R80) thought that the online student evaluation allowed students more time to reflect on their learning experience, as they could fill in their responses at their convenience.

“That they are online! They should provide a better opportunity to gather more feedback from all the students” (R80, Engineering & Physics male tutor, 3-5 year experience, M = 3.79).

However, as indicated in Table 3 respondents were particularly concerned about the timing of the distribution of the student evaluation questionnaire (e.g. R97). The literature (Kember & Ginns, 2012; Marsh, 1984) recommends that they are distributed and completed before students have completed their coursework/examinations, or even provided their marks, as this may lead students to evaluate the (perceived) difficulty of examinations or (perceived) fairness of grades. However, many respondents indicated that they wanted to have the student evaluation questionnaire available when all feedback on coursework was provided, or after grades had been distributed.

“The window over which students can complete the [student evaluation questionnaire] is too wide and this could seriously affect the results for assessment and feedback. In the past we could ensure that the [student evaluation questionnaire] was timed so that students had been given feedback, but if it is opened too early students will not have the benefit of this” (R97, Business education female lecturer, 5-10 year experience, M = 3.11).

A second concern was the (perceived) drop in response-rates, followed by (the validity of) the questionnaire design. 17 participants provided feedback on why the questionnaire design was not (entirely) appropriate for their discipline, while 21 participants provided comments on adding additional items. Furthermore, several participants were worried about how management was going to use the scores and what the underlying purposes were for student evaluations.

“It would allow more students to take part in, even when they are not interested in attending lectures. This whole student-centred way of evaluating teaching ignores the tendency that some students do not have the ability to evaluate the academic merits of modules. We are helping creating a culture a customer-based educational service feedback centre” (R73, Law male lecturer, 3-5 year experience, M = 2.89).

Several respondents (e.g. R67, R73) were sceptical whether students would be able to evaluate the academic merits of modules, in particular as students could complete the questionnaire without attending all sessions.

“There is a significant problem in using [student evaluation questionnaires] to assess student learning and an evident disparity between student learning and student satisfaction. Are we really assessing their learning or just what they enjoy? The two are not the same thing. Additionally, there is a clear difference in students' and lecturers' conceptualisation of some key issues such as 'feedback' and this really needs to be addressed” (R67, Arts & Humanities female lecturer, 3-5 year experience, M = 3.56).

Semi-structured interview results

In order to unpack the above experiences in more detail, follow-up semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight members of academic staff. The basic demographics and years of experience at this particular institution are provided in brackets. As the interviews progressed, it became clear that approximately half of the participants were negative about the transition to the online student evaluation

experience. In terms of the first key theme, communication, all eight participants were in general positive, although some described the frequency of communication as excessive.

In terms of the second theme, appropriateness of response rates, most participants (e.g. I3, I6) indicated they expected a lower (perceived) response rate. Furthermore, several participants were worried about the need to continuously remind students to fill in the student evaluations (I6). As indicated by I3, there were some concerns as to whether students who attended the lectures or not filled in the student evaluations, leading to a potential response bias.

“Ours were down, ours were never as high as that anyway. We always had poor because we always had poor attendance in the last couple of weeks because of a lot of deadlines. The other thing that concerned me about it was that there was a difference between going in with a form to the people who have turned up. So before I at least knew it was mostly the students who had been there throughout the semester who were responding” (I3, Arts & Humanities female lecturer, 5-10 years experience).

“[I]t seemed to be down a little bit. However, I think there is a concern that to get the same response rate for something vaguely similar, we’re doing an awful lot more work and harassing students a lot more than we were before” (I6, Arts & Humanities male senior lecturer, 10+ years experience).

Finally, I2 indicated less surprise and suggested that the response rate was affected by the intentions and actions of each lecturer.

“I got the response I expected I would get, although I think the ones I got were probably less than what the average was, which I can admittedly say was because I personally didn’t push the [student evaluation questionnaire] myself” (I2, Engineering & Physics male lecturer, 5-10 years experience).

The new questionnaire design, the third theme, was a concern for several participants. Some (e.g. I8) were in general positive, while others were sceptical about the framing of the questions. In particular the assessment and feedback scale was contentious and whether the newly added question validated by Onwuegbuzie et al. (2007, “The teaching staff gave me regular feedback about how well I am doing in the module”) was appropriate or not. Although this item was the most important item in the students’ learning experience according to Principal Component Analyses (Rienties & Tempelaar, In Preparation), many staff were worried about whether students perceive regular feedback in the same way as staff.

“I think these have actually been a big improvement these [student evaluation questionnaire]s and this number of questions, I feel personally with my modules, I’ve got actually a much more nuanced view of the strengths and weaknesses of my teaching, which is actually very useful” (I8, Arts & Humanities male lecturer, 5-10 years experience).

“I’m not sure how students would be in a position to know whether the assessment was reasonable, because they are after all still relatively early in their careers, and even academics would have good arguments between each other about whether an assessment was, you know, good or bad.” (I7, Arts & Humanities male professor, 15+ years experience).

Furthermore, some questions about student-teacher interaction and recognition of individual learner needs (e.g., “Teaching staff were responsive to the learning needs of different students” by Centra (2005)) raised concerns about whether students expectations were being (unreasonably) raised. Even though the new questionnaire design incorporated more questions about students’ self-determination and their own responsibilities, several staff noted that the questionnaire primarily focused on the teacher rather than students.

“If you’ve got a lecture of 200 people, I think it’s virtually impossible to get a strong score on [item Teaching staff are responsive to the learning needs of different students] or at least much more difficult ... there is a danger that you actually create a student expectation by having in certain questions” (I6).

The fourth theme, the feedback results back to academics, was perceived to be positive by all eight participants. However, the amount of detail requested differed substantially amongst participants, whereby some wanted more technical details (I2: histograms for each lecturer), while others struggled with the amount and visualisation of data.

In terms of the fifth theme, overall experience, the reason for ambivalence by (some) academics seemed to be related to what was believed to be a dual function of student evaluations. Several participants indicated that the role of management in interpreting the scores of student evaluations could be improved, as “management still jumped up and down every time something looked a little bit odd”.

“But just to come back to the dual function of these things, I mean the [student evaluation questionnaire]s could be much more useful to staff and they’d have less of the kind of anxieties ... if they weren’t also simultaneously treated as a management tool for beating people up with. Because nobody ever comes along to you and says, ‘Look, [I7], you’re above average by a small amount.’ [Laughs]. You know, ‘Well done!’ That never happens. But what does happen ... is that you get told [by senior management]: ‘so and so looks really dreadful! Go and beat them up!’ And it’s not surprising that people get very concerned ...” (I7).

Discussions

In this explorative, mixed-method case-study, I unpacked why some academics reported a negative perspective over a university-wide transition to online student evaluations, while others were more ambivalent or even positive. By using the three attitudinal dimensions of ambivalence/resistance by Piderit (2000) in conjunction with academics’ anxieties towards technology (Blin & Munro, 2008; Hanson, 2009), the diverging experiences of 104 module convenors were compared, followed by in-depth interviews amongst eight academics. Given that the response rates of the online evaluation method amongst 629 modules were comparable to the paper-based implementation the year before, more staff had passed the 4.0 target, and twice as much feedback was written by

students, the expectation was that the majority of academic staff would be satisfied with the transition despite (potential) ambivalence or resistance to change.

In terms of the five key identified themes for successful transition towards online student evaluations (Bennett & De Bellis, 2010; Blin & Munro, 2008; Crews & Curtis, 2011; Kember & Ginns, 2012; Piderit, 2000; Stowell et al., 2011), approximately half of respondents were positive about the communication about the transition, the response rates obtained, and the feedback reports sent back to academics. However, only a third of respondents were positive about the overall experience of the transition towards online evaluation and the design of the new, more student-focussed questionnaire.

Follow-up semi-structured interviews amongst eight academics indicated a tension between cognitive and emotional attitudes and intentions. There was a cognitive understanding of why a move towards online evaluations would be beneficial for the institution. However, strong (negative) emotional attitudes became apparent during the interviews, which were primarily related to a perceived dual nature of student evaluations (Baldwin & Blattner, 2003; Kember & Ginns, 2012; Titus, 2008). As indicated by respondent I7 who had experience in performing both roles of senior management and “being a teacher”, if student evaluations were only used for further fine-tuning and improvement of teaching and learning, most academics would be positive about student evaluations, whether in a paper or online format. However, as scores on student evaluations were also used for tenure and promotion, many staff noted concern and some anxiety over a switch to online student evaluations even after a “successful” technical transition. Indeed, several academics felt that getting a high score on student evaluations was more important than concentrating on providing a valuable learning experience for students in the long run.

A second important reason for ambivalence towards online student evaluations was the perceived lack of control of the process. Uncertainty about who was completing the online student evaluations (e.g., non-attending students) was specifically mentioned, reflecting a concern previously found by Crews and Curtis (2011). Furthermore, as the completion of the student evaluations was not specifically linked to a particular teaching event, academics indicated to be less in control of helping students to “frame” the link between learning experience, intended learning outcomes, the adopted teaching and learning method, and the feedback provided.

A third concern expressed by academics was that substantial effort was needed to continuously remind students to complete the online evaluation in order to obtain similar response rates to the previous paper-based evaluation. However, while previous studies (Dommeyer et al., 2004; Nulty, 2008; Stowell et al., 2011) on transition from paper-based to online evaluation have indicated an average drop of 20-23% in response rates, to the best of knowledge not a single study has found an average response rate of a university-wide implementation of 60%. This may indicate a potential trade-off in obtaining high response-rates. An extensive level of communication to all stakeholders involved (students, academics, heads of departments) was undertaken and this appears to have achieved the higher response rate. However, there was a (perceived) pressure on academics (and students) to participate, which may have led to contribute to the potential negative feelings of extensive communication reported.

This extensive communication of students and academic staff during the initial stages of transitional process may be necessary to raise awareness amongst the stakeholders about the organisational change process from paper to online evaluation and therefore may recede over time. When the organisational change process is completed, it would seem reasonable to expect that fewer reminders for academics and

students are needed. Future research taking a longitudinal perspective should explore whether this academic resistance/ambivalence does indeed become less persistent over time.

Limitations, future research and practical implications

A limitation of this mixed-method study is its self-reporting nature, whereby perceived socially desirable behaviour might influence the results. Alternatively, academics with strong negative attitudes towards online evaluations might have been more inclined to participate to express their concerns, while academics who were more neutral or even positive might not have felt the need to respond. Although for social science benchmarks a fairly reasonable response rate of 27% was obtained, non-response bias might be a concern, which given the anonymous nature of this study could not control for. Furthermore, only eight academics participated in follow-up interviews. Given that I triangulated the quantitative survey results with in-depth interviews of eight academics (four were positive towards the organisational change, four were resistant) across four faculties, a more nuanced picture of how academics' attitudes influenced their support, ambivalence or resistance to an online student evaluation was provided.

Although methodologically challenging, given that organisational change is strongly influenced by the (in)formal social networks of academics and departmental structures in particular (Blin & Munro, 2008; Daly & Finnigan, 2010; Hanson, 2009; Jimoyiannis & Komis, 2007; Piderit, 2000), future research could explore whether certain groups of academics or departments have stronger positive/negative attitudes, which may further assist the organisational change process in understanding the multidimensional nature of ambivalence, and how this can be overcome. Research in organisational behaviour (Bohle Carbonell, Rienties, & Van den Bossche, 2011; Casciaro, 1998; Daly & Finnigan, 2010) indicates that measuring complex and dynamic

interactions using social network analyses, organisational change managers can obtain a better understanding of why groups support or resist organisational change. This may provide useful information for a more tailored approach to organisational change (Bohle Carbonell et al., 2011; Daly & Finnigan, 2010; Piderit, 2000). For example, in order to prevent communication fatigue, academics who already have positive cognitive and emotional attitudes towards online student evaluation should receive only one or two reminders with messages framed more in line with their own attitudes. The group of academics who have negative attitudes may be invited to consultation meetings to better understand and address their concerns. This would also allow organisations to better understand the underlying causes of their ambivalence, which using principles of nudge theorem (Coxhead et al., 2010), if designed appropriately, could be used strategically in order to persuade some of the academics to turn their negative attitudes towards online evaluations into positive ones.

In conclusion, this study highlights that when the five key themes of online student evaluation are appropriately addressed and communicated with the key stakeholders, universities can get response rates similar to paper-based evaluations. At the same time, the strong negative attitudes towards online students evaluations found in several studies do not necessarily relate to the method of surveying, but rather to the dual nature of student evaluation.

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Table 1 Descriptive statistics of academics experience with online student evaluation

Scale	Item	M	SD	Chi-Square
COM	1. I received sufficient information about the transition to the online student evaluation	3.56	1.26	32.511**
COM	2. The materials I received to inform my students about the online student evaluation (e.g. YouTube movie, Powerpoint slides) were useful	3.13	1.18	33.655**
COM	3. The weekly email updates (i.e. updates on response rates; tips to further improve response) were useful	2.82	1.21	32.574**
COM	4. When I had a query about the online student evaluation, I received appropriate support from the educational unit	3.18	1.13	5.96
RES	5. I believe explaining the purpose and importance of module evaluations to students results in a higher response rates	3.54	1.10	19.945**
RES	6. I actively encouraged my students to participate in the online student evaluations	4.25	0.78	18.769**
RES	7. Getting students to complete the online student evaluation was easy	2.98	1.01	28.026**
RES	8. I am satisfied with the response rate of my module(s)	3.07	1.17	31.003**
RES	9. I believe paper module evaluations result in a higher response rate from students than online student evaluations	3.52	1.15	17.777**
QD	10. Overall I am satisfied with the new questionnaire design	2.93	1.17	56.914**
QD	11. In comparison to the previous questionnaire design, the new design is better	3.07	1.12	42.147**
QD	12. The 25 questions and five scales (ie. teachers support; learning experience and pedagogy; module design; student-interaction; assessment & feedback) provide a good insight of my teaching and learning	3.05	1.14	37.311**
QD	13. No additional questions need to be added to the online student evaluation	3.33	1.08	9.023
FB	14. The report(s) about my student evaluation scores was useful	3.61	1.10	44.235**
FB	15. In comparison to last-year's reports, the new style of reporting provide more information that is relevant	3.22	1.20	42.678**
FB	16. The visualisation of the various student evaluation scores was useful	3.51	1.25	36.719**
FB	17. I received more helpful qualitative feedback (open responses) in comparison to previous years	2.56	1.14	28.792**
FB	18. Overall I am satisfied about the feedback from the student evaluation reports	3.07	1.28	61.524**
OE	19. Overall, I am satisfied with the online student evaluation	2.98	1.35	76.662**
OE	20. I prefer online student evaluations over paper-based student evaluations	2.89	1.29	42.708**
Average scores		3.17	0.84	104.000*

Note: COM = Communication, RES = Response rate, QD = Questionnaire design, FB = Feedback about student evaluation scores, OE = Overall experience.

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$. A median split was conducted on the average score (Median = 3.25) in order to distinguish two groups of academics. Although I caution the reader that the median-split technique is a rather crude statistical approach and the academics experiences were more along a continuum, there seemed some support of the notion of a "love-hate" conundrum between these two groups of respondents.

Table 2 Descriptive statistics and correlation matrix

Scale	M	SD	α	1	2	3	4
1. Communication	3.17	.97	.81				
2. Response rate	3.27	.74	.74	.55**			
3. Questionnaire design	3.01	1.04	.89	.72**	.61**		
4. Feedback about student evaluation scores	3.23	1.04	.90	.70**	.61**	.77**	
5. Overall experience	2.96	1.27	.89	.65**	.71**	.78**	.81**

$**p < .01.$

Table 3 Themes from open text boxes on main (dis)advantages online student evaluations

Themes	Positive	Negative
1. Communication	1	7
2. Response rate	1	12
- Bias in response (due to students not attending lectures but filling in the questionnaire)		8
- Effort needed to encourage students		2
3. Questionnaire design	3	11
- Length of questionnaire (too long)		3
4. Feedback provision to staff	9	11
- Quicker turn-around time feedback	6	1
5. Overall experience	3	
- Easier for module convenor	9	
- Time available in class to do other things	7	
- Amount of qualitative feedback received from students	3	1
- Less fiddling of results by academic staff and students	3	
- More time for student's reflection on learning experience	3	
- Timing of distribution student evaluation		21
- Student evaluation as a tool for management		7
- Abusive comments		3
# Total	54	70
# Total words	901	4346

Figure 1 Histogram of academics' average experience with student evaluation

